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Looking Behind Lawyer's Image Turns Up Some Contradictions

Special to The New York Times

SAN FRANCISCO, Jan. 23 — The credentials presented by Mark Lane to his client, the People's Temple, were impressive, judging from a biography that rested in the Temple's files.

The biography quoted Fred J. Nichol, a Federal judge from South Dakota, as describing Mr. Lane as "the finest investigator in the country." It went on to note that Mr. Lane had been a member of the New York State Legislature, had managed John F. Kennedy's 1960 Presidential campaign in the New York City area and had been a professor of law at Catholic University in Washington, D.C.

Judge Nichol, who presided in 1975 over the Wounded Knee trial at which Mr. Lane served as a defense counsel, said in a telephone interview that he was "not sure" he had made such a statement but "I might've been carried away."

However, the Kennedy Library in Cambridge, Mass., said it had no record indicating Mr. Lane was involved in the 1960 Presidential campaign. And Sue Nelson, an information officer at Catholic University, said Mr. Lane was never employed there as a professor of law, although he was retained a few years ago as an untenured lecturer for an evening class of about 20 law students.

Known as Defender of the Poor

According to the best available sources of information, Mark Lane was born in New York City Feb. 24, 1927. He graduated from Brooklyn Law School in 1951 and shortly afterward set up practice in East Harlem, where he acquired a reputation as a defender of the poor and the oppressed.

Seymour Ostrow, his law partner then, said recently that Mr. Lane's reputation was largely an illusion. Their small firm, Mr. Ostrow said, drew its clients mostly from the impoverished neighborhood. But he said Mr. Lane seemed to be "motivated more by his ambition and quest for publicity than any dedication to a cause or concern for the interests of his clients."

He said Mr. Lane made much of his role in helping found a narcotics clinic that purported to have a cure for drug addiction, a cure that Mr. Ostrow said did not exist. "I don't think they did terribly much except publicize themselves," he said of the clinic's operators.

When the shaky law partnership broke up in the late 1950's, Mr. Lane began to associate with the fledgling civil rights movement, and he was arrested with some Freedom Riders in Mississippi.

Mr. Lane had political ambitions. In 1960 he was elected to the state Assembly from Manhattan's 10th District, which embraced East Harlem and Yorkville, where Mr. Lane lived.

His two years in Albany were stormy. He accused the Speaker, Joseph F. Carlino, of a conflict of interests in having promoted the construction of fallout shelters while holding a financial interest in a company that produced them. The Assembly sided with Mr. Carlino, endorsing, 143 to 1, a committee report that cleared the Speaker. Mr. Lane cast the dissenting vote.

Bentley Kassal, one of Mr. Lane's fellow Assemblymen and now a State Supreme Court Justice, said that Mr. Lane "seemed dedicated to publicity" during his two years in Albany and that, aside from the Carlino fight and a few instances in which Mr. Lane would "take old bills and retread them," the Assembly "didn't see much" of him.

Near the end of his term, Mr. Lane announced that he would seek the Democratic nomination for Congress from the 19th District, but Mr. Kassal beat Mr. Lane in pre-primary voting by the reform Democrats and Mr. Lane never ran for elective office again, returning instead to the civil rights movement, which was in full flower.

In a recent interview with The Memphis Commercial Appeal, Mr. Lane recalled being arrested with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King while trying to desegregate a Baltimore amusement park. But D'Army Bailey, a Memphis lawyer who, with Mr. Lane, was among the 200 or so protesters arrested at the demonstration on July 4, 1963, said he had no recollection of Dr. King's being present.

Several Books Plus One

Mr. Lane is currently engaged in attempting to free James Earl Ray, Dr. King's confessed killer, who now says he did not commit the crime but was coerced into confessing.

A few months after the Baltimore demonstration, President Kennedy was assassinated, and it was Mr. Lane's early, loud criticism of the Warren Commission's investigation — especially in his book "Rush to Judgment" — that propelled him to national prominence.

In the intervening years Mr. Lane has written other books about controversial events with which he has become involved, and soon there is to be one about his involvement with the People's Temple in Jonestown, Guyana.

In a recent interview, Mr. Lane said he planned at least one book after that, an autobiography or a memoir. He had decided on a title, he said: "Fly in the Ointment."